Constructing Postmodernism

Brian McHale

Constructing postmodernism

"Postmodernism is not a found object, but a manufactured artifact."
Beginning from this constructivist premise, Brian McHale develops a series
of readings of problematically postmodernist novels – Joyce's *Ulysses*,
Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Vineland*, Eco's *The Name of the Rose*
and *Foucault's Pendulum*, the novels of Joseph McElroy and Christine
Brooke-Rose, avant-garde works such as Kathy Acker's *Empire of the
Senseless*, and works of cyberpunk science-fiction by William Gibson,
Bruce Sterling, Lewis Shiner, Rudy Rucker and others. Although mainly
focused on "high" or "elite" cultural products – "art" novels – *Construct-
ing Postmodernism* relates these products to such phenomena of postmod-
ern popular culture as television and the cinema, paranoia and nuclear
anxiety, angelology and the cybernetic interface, and death, now as always
(in spite of what Captain Kirk says) the true Final Frontier.

McHale's previous book, *Postmodernist Fiction*, had seemed to propose a
single, all-inclusive inventory of postmodernist poetics. This book, by
contrast, proposes multiple, overlapping and intersecting inventories –
not a construction of postmodernism, but a plurality of constructions.
Constructing Postmodernism will be essential reading for all students of
contemporary literature and culture.

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For Clara Siepmann and Dorothy McHale Chambers
and in memory of
Herman A. Siepmann 1900–89

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Acknowledgments

Finally, my thanks to George Milner and Claire McHale Milner for taking us to an exhibition at Penn State that they rightly guessed would appeal to our postmodernist sensibilities, thereby introducing me to the paintings of Robert Yarber; and to Sanford Sivitz Shaman, organizer of that exhibition and author of the exhibition catalogue, for further information and insight into the painter I have come to regard as the best of his (and my) generation.

It seems redundant somehow to acknowledge Esther, Alma, and Lily, since we're all in this together – never more so than during those strange, anxious hours of January and February 1991 when, breathing through gasmasks, we sat listening to radio broadcasts harder to believe than reports of an invasion from Mars, and waited for the all-clear to sound. This is one postmodernist experience I do not recommend: writing about Pynchon during the day, spending the night listening for air raid sirens . . .

Introducing constructing

CONSTRUCTIVISM, OR, DOES POSTMODERNISM EXIST?

No doubt there "is" no such "thing" as postmodernism. Or at least there is no such thing if what one has in mind is some kind of identifiable object "out there" in the world, localizable, bounded by a definite outline, open to inspection, possessing attributes about which we can all agree. But postmodernism's failure to satisfy the criteria of objecthood is one it shares with other interesting and valuable cultural artifacts, such as, for example, "the Renaissance" or "American literature" or "pastoral elegy" or "Shakespeare." Like these other artifacts, postmodernism exists discursively, in the discourses we produce *about* it and *using* it. The word "postmodernism," as Alan Thiher says, "has become a counter in our language games" (Thiher 1984:227), and in that sense, if in no other, postmodernism does indeed exist.

One such language game in which the word "postmodernism" figured as a counter was a book called *Postmodernist Fiction* (McHale 1987). There the present writer sought to invest the term with a certain definite semantic substance, and to persuade others to understand the concept in the way he had come to understand it and to use the term as he used it. In that book, too, I insisted on the discursive and constructed character of postmodernism, though perhaps not often enough or memorably enough, since some readers (see, e.g., Connor 1989:124–6) seem to have come away thinking I had attributed to postmodernism the kind of "fixed essence" that Alan Thiher rightly denies to it. This is a rhetorical problem (though not a "merely" rhetorical one): how to persuade the reader to entertain a particular construction of postmodernism while at the same time preserving a sense of the provisionality, the "as if" character, of all such constructions? Inevitably (or so it seems), in the course of an exposition devoted to substantiating one particular construction of postmodernism, the constructivist emphasis itself tends to get lost. There is a delicate balance to be maintained between advocating a particular version of constructed

reality and entertaining a plurality of versions, and it may be that *Postmodernist Fiction* failed to maintain that balance.

The present book aspires to get the balance right; or at least to make explicit what evidently remained too implicit in its predecessor. To this end it wears its constructivism on its sleeve – or rather, in its title. By "constructivism" I mean something like the constructivist epistemology whose consequences for literary study Siegfried Schmidt has explored (Schmidt 1984, 1985; for other, more or less compatible versions, see, e.g., Berger and Luckmann 1966; Goodman 1978; Rorty 1982). Constructivism's basic epistemological principle is that *all* our cognitive operations, including (or especially) perception itself, are theory-dependent. This means, first of all, that data do not exist independently of a theory that constitutes them *as* data; they are not so much "given" as "taken," seized. "A datum," writes Schmidt, " . . . is but a datum 'in the light of' the theoretical framework of a particular observer" (1985:282). Or, as Goodman puts it, facts "are theory-laden; they are as theory-laden as we hope our theories are fact-laden" (1978:96–7).

Granted the theory-dependency of "facts," it follows that faithfulness to objective "truth" cannot be a criterion for evaluating versions of reality (since the truth will have been produced by the version that is being evaluated by its faithfulness to the truth, and so on, circularly). The appropriate criteria for evaluation now are, for instance, the explicitness of the version; its intersubjective accessibility; its "empirical-mindedness," i.e. its aspiration to be as empirical as possible, where empiricism is not a method but a *horizon* to be approached only asymptotically; and, above all, the adequacy of the version to its intended purpose (Schmidt 1985:285, 292, 298). In other words, constructions, or what I have been calling versions of reality, are *strategic* in nature, that is, designed with particular purposes in view.

In the particular case of those constructs we call literary histories (of which the present book and its predecessor are both, in different ways, examples), the constructivist approach focuses our attention on the problem of *concatenating* data into coherent larger units, such as "periods," "schools," "genres," etc. (Schmidt 1985:282). These too, of course, are constructs; "postmodernism" is one of them. So, too, for that matter is "literature" itself.[1] Literary histories, Schmidt concludes, "are *constructions* and not reconstructions, and . . . the work of the literary historian is constructive through and through." Moreover, "literary histories exist but not *literary history*" (Schmidt 1985:294); that is, literary-historical versions cannot be reduced to a single, univocal version, but must remain irreducibly plural.

Postmodernist Fiction perhaps seemed to propose a single, all-inclusive inventory of features or characteristics of postmodernist writing, and a single corpus of texts, and seemed to aspire (however inadequately) to

encyclopedic exhaustiveness. By contrast, *Constructing Postmodernism* proposes multiple, overlapping and intersecting inventories and multiple corpora; not *a* construction of postmodernism, but a plurality of constructions; constructions that, while not necessarily mutually contradictory, are not fully integrated, or perhaps even integrable, either. In other words, the present book, much more so than its predecessor, tries to acknowledge (however feebly) what Robert Venturi (1977) has called "the obligation toward the difficult whole."

I choose to regard the "imperfect" integration of these essays as illustration and corroboration of the point I have tried to make throughout this book about the plurality of possible constructions in literary history (and cultural studies generally) and the strategic nature of construction. I wish I could pretend that I set out programmatically to produce a plurality of constructions; unfortunately, it was not as deliberate as that. However, having recognized *post factum* that these essays *do* possess this kind of plurality, I have not sought to reduce multiplicity by imposing upon it some (arbitrary) uniformity of model; rather, I have let the multiplicity stand, as appropriate to the book's thesis. In fact, not only have I not tried to suppress or resolve inconsistencies or contradictions (apparent or real) between chapters, I have occasionally even called attention to them.[2]

If literary-historical "objects" such as postmodernism are constructed, not given or found, then the issue of *how* such objects are constructed, in particular the genre of discourse *in which* they are constructed, becomes crucial. For, as Schmidt observes (1985:283–4), the relations to be constructed among the "data" depend intimately on the genre of their presentation. Narrative, Schmidt reminds us, has been the preferred genre of literary histories, but it is not the only possible genre of literary history, and one could imagine literary history that used some alternative mode of discourse (e.g. collage or montage, argumentation, etc.; Schmidt 1985:283–4, 297).

Nevertheless, I have come to prefer narrative constructions of literary history, here and elsewhere. In *Postmodernist Fiction*, I told a story about how, through a change in the structuring of texts, the modernist poetics of fiction gave way to postmodernist poetics. In the present introduction, I have been telling a story about how the book before you continues and extends the preoccupations of its predecessor, while also aspiring to correct some of the latter's shortcomings. I propose to keep right on telling stories until the end of this book. Schmidt, however, has suggested that narrative, just because it is the normative mode for constructing history, including literary history, ought perhaps to be abandoned in favor of alternative genres (Schmidt 1985:297). So, before going any further, I must pause to defend my decision to narrate.

NARRATIVE TURNS

Once upon a time there used to be narratology, which had aspirations to be the science of narrative. Whatever happened to it? "It got swallowed into story," Christine Brooke-Rose answers (Brooke-Rose 1991:16). And therein lies a tale.

For something like two decades, beginning with the ferment of Parisian structuralist narratology in the sixties (Barthes, Bremond, Genette, Greimas, Todorov) and parallel developments elsewhere (e.g. in Israel), narrative was a favored, perhaps *the* favored, object of literary theorizing. The passing of that era seems to have been signalled by the consolidation of narratology in the eighties in a series of handbooks[3] and synoptic surveys of the state of the art.[4] The appearance of such publications indicates, at the very least, the end of the exciting phase of paradigm-building and the onset of "normal science." Lately the tables have been turned, and instead of narrative being the object of narratological theory, it is theory that has become the object of narrative: where once we had theories about narrative, we begin now to have stories about theory.

But that is not the whole story (so to speak), because while narrative has tended to displace narratology in its "home" discipline, namely literary studies, narratology has responded to its displacement by leaving home, emigrating to adjacent disciplines where the findings of narratological research, far from seeming outdated, still make news (see Bal 1990; Barry 1990; Nash 1990). So story, in one form or another, whether as object *of* theory or as the alternative *to* theory, seems to be everywhere. Historiography (LaCapra 1985; White 1987), psychology (Spence 1982; Bruner 1986), philosophy (Rorty 1982, 1985, 1989), sociology (Brown 1987), economics (McCloskey 1990), and many other fields and disciplines of the human sciences – all have recently been affected by what Christopher Norris (1985) has called the "narrative turn" of theory. It is indicative that the editors of a recent volume of conference papers on "Objectivity and Science" (Lawson and Appignanesi 1989) would choose to use "stories" in titles where once they would have used "theories": "Stories About Science," "Stories About Truth," "Stories About Representation," even (what else?) "Stories About Stories." A number of theorists (or what we would once have called theorists), some from within the literary discipline, others "outsiders," have been influential in getting us to think in terms of "telling stories" rather than "doing theory," among them Richard Rorty, Fredric Jameson, and Jean-François Lyotard.

The narrative turn would seem to be one of the contemporary responses to the loss of metaphysical "grounding" or "foundations" for our theorizing. We are no longer confident that we can build intellectual structures upward from firm epistemological and ontological foundations. We suspect, with Nelson Goodman (1978), that, while there may well be some-

where a "world" underlying all our disparate versions of it, that world is finally inaccessible, and all we have are the versions; but that hardly matters, since it is only the versions that are of any use to us anyway, and the putative world-before-all-versions is, as Rorty (1982) says, "well lost." Nevertheless, there is a problem here: lacking foundations, how are we to proceed? "A postmodernist cannot build a foundation before constructing a construction," writes William S. Wilson; paradoxically, "foundation is constructed and strengthened by what is built upon it" (Wilson 1989:27, 14). Narrative in particular recommends itself as a means of building foundations by constructing constructions because storytelling (at least in its traditional forms) bears within it its own (provisional) self-grounding, its own (local, limited) self-legitimation (Lyotard 1984b; cf. Brown 1987:170–1; Tyler 1987:216).

It is in the spirit of this response to the so-called legitimation crisis that Stephen Tyler has made his extraordinary claim that today ethnography is the "superordinate discourse to which all other discourses are relativized and in which they find their meaning and justification" (1987:199). In a postmodern situation in which science, in particular, is no longer able to legitimate itself by appealing to metaphysical foundations, it is only through the ethnographic context of scientific practice that science can hope to ground itself, and that context is available to us only through the discourse of ethnography, the foundational discourse of the postmodern world (Tyler 1987:200) – or, at any rate, what the postmodern world has in lieu of foundational discourse. However, when Tyler speaks of ethnographic discourse he is clearly thinking *not* of present models of "scientific" ethnography, but something different, a postmodern ethnography which would be a good deal more like story-telling: "a story of sorts," "cooperative story making" (Tyler 1987:203). This ethnographic narrative discourse, stories about theorizing and in place of theorizing, would nevertheless be local and provisional, not some kind of all-mastering meta-narrative or "story of stories" (Tyler 1987:208) in which postmoderns have found they can no longer believe.[5]

For the narrative turn of theory has also provoked a counter-reaction, the most conspicuous symptom of which is what might be called the "anxiety of metanarratives." It all begins with Lyotard, who has persuaded us that metanarratives or master-narratives ("grands récits"), the various stories (Enlightenment, Marxist, Hegelian) about human emancipation and progress that once served to ground and legitimate knowledge, are no longer credible (1984b). In the hands of epigonic thinkers, Lyotard's description has been turned into a prescription: avoid at all costs the appearance of endorsing metanarratives (since nobody believes in them any more); or, more briefly: avoid story; don't narrate. Moreover, the thesis of "incredulity toward metanarratives" has been turned against its originator. Linda Hutcheon, for instance, accuses Lyotard of having

produced "an obviously meta-narrative theory of postmodernism's incredulity to meta-narrative" (Hutcheon 1988:198). In a similar vein, though more cruelly, John Mepham has written that Lyotard "tells a simple tale about the naivety of tale-telling, grandly narrativizes his incredulity towards grand narratives" (Mepham 1991:147).

In a situation in which we are being urged to "just say no" to narrative, and where even attempting to describe the situation is likely to draw accusations of metanarrating, it is hard to see how one is to avoid succumbing to a paralyzing anxiety *not to be seen to narrate*. One corrective to this anxiety would be simply to deny that there are now or have ever been metanarratives (see Montag 1988:95). In others words, despite what it may claim about itself, no self-professed metanarrative (including, e.g., the Marxist one) has ever been other than a first-order narrative with pretentions above its station, just one more story like all the others and not any kind of masterful "story of stories." Just like all the other stories, every putative metanarrative is conditioned by the situation of its telling, the identity and interests of its tellers and audience, the purpose for which it was told, and so on.

Another approach would be to learn to "tolerate the anxiety" (Barthelme 1976:119). This would involve admitting that, since there is no escaping metanarratives anyway, one might as well go ahead and tell one's story. To undertake to make sense of a complex phenomenon such as postmodern culture is inevitably to tell some kind of story about it, and that story will inevitably be implicated in some metanarrative or other. Rather than letting one's discourse be shaped, or rather deformed, by the desire to evade and deflect accusations of metanarrativity, better to try to tell as good a story as possible, one that makes the richest possible sense of the phenomenon in question and provokes the liveliest possible critical scrutiny, controversy, counter-proposals and (yes, why not?) counter-stories. This, I gather, is something like Fredric Jameson's attitude, when he writes,

> I have proposed a "model" of postmodernism, which is worth what it's worth and must now take its chances independently; but it is the construction of such a model that is ultimately the fascinating matter, and I hope it will not be taken as a knee-jerk affirmation of "pluralism" if I say that alternate constructions are desirable and welcome, since the grasping of the present from within is the most problematical task the mind can face.
>
> (Jameson 1989:383–4)

This was my own approach in *Postmodernist Fiction*, and it is again here, where, acknowledging the inevitability of metanarratives, I have sought only to "demote" them if possible to "little" or "minor" narratives, that

is, to endorse them but only provisionally and locally, and otherwise to learn to tolerate the anxiety.

As the father of two young daughters, I am in a sense a professional storyteller – and not just at bedtime, either, but whenever world-knowledge of whatever kind (the day's program, neighborhood gossip, family and personal history, the political situation) needs to be organized and transmitted. No doubt my experience reflects what many thinkers today have come to believe, namely that "one of the ways human beings assess and interpret the events of their life is through the construction of plausible narratives," or even that "narrative is the form of intelligible discourse proper to human life" (Bernstein 1990).[6] Moreover, I have in recent years become increasingly aware of the degree to which I am also a storyteller in my "other" profession, that of university lecturer.[7] A lecture, particularly if it is about literary history (my usual subject), is a story; an entire course of lectures is a long, complicated story with many episodes and sub-plots. Reflecting on the role of narrative in the organiz-ation and transmission of literary-historical knowledge, I have come more and more to emphasize the narrativity, the story-telling character, of my own pedagogical practice. I begin most courses by reminding my students that literary history is, by definition, a narrative discipline, and that we are here to tell cooperatively (in Tyler's sense of "cooperative story making") what we hope will be a "good" story about (say) the relations between the British and American literary systems during a specified period. I often invite my students to reflect on "the story so far" – its intelligibility, its persuasiveness; and I insist on the multiplicity of possible alternative or competing stories, and seek to develop criteria for distin-guishing better literary-historical narratives from less good ones.

Of course, it is also possible to construct literary-historical knowledge in other than narrative forms – for instance, in "spatialized" forms. Thus, instead of a story, one could readily imagine organizing a literary history in the form of a list or anthology of canonical texts (or for that matter, of marginalized or un- or counter-canonical texts). Alternatively, one could organize it in the form of parallel lists of contrasting or opposed features: in the left-hand column, the defining features of period A; in the right-hand column, the contrasting features that define period B. Thus, for example:

Hierarchy	Anarchy
Presence	Absence
Genital	Polymorphous
Narrative	Anti-narrative
Metaphysics	Irony
Determinacy	Indeterminacy

Construction of a world-model	Deconstruction of a world-model
Ontological certainty	Ontological uncertainty

(Lethen 1986:235)

In this particular spatialized representation of history, the left-hand column shows the features of modernism, with the contrasting features of post-modernism on the right.[8]

Yet in a certain sense spatialized forms of representation are only, like written music, notations for a potential performance – in this case, the performance of a narrative. A canon always implies a legitimating story and, vice versa, a literary-historical narrative always implies a canon of texts and authors. Similarly, behind the static oppositions of features organized in parallel columns we readily discern the narrative syntax that absorbs, motivates, and dynamizes them. We read the opposed terms as, respectively, initial state and end state in the story of a transformation, from left to right: from Hierarchy to Anarchy, from Presence to Absence, from Metaphysics to Irony, and so on. If we are disposed to be fanciful, perhaps we even go so far as to "read" the white space between the parallel columns as the sign of postmodernism's "rupture" with the mod-ernist past, a kind of visual icon of the historical fault-line separating the periods. In short, narrative forms of intelligibility are harder to repress than one might have supposed, and even spatialized representations of literary history turn out to be implicitly stories.

THE STORY SO FAR

In terms of E.M. Forster's memorable distinction, the story I told in *Postmodernist Fiction* constituted a plot.[9] That is, it not only arranged events in temporal sequence – first modernist poetics, then postmodernist poetics – but supplied a *causal motivation* for the sequence: first modern-ism, then, *because of* a change of dominant, postmodernism.[10] Of course, causes are always themselves the effects of other, deeper or more ultimate causes. Thus, the shift of dominance from epistemology to ontology, in my narrative the cause of which postmodernism is the effect, could in its turn be motivated as the effect of a further cause. It could, for instance, be seen as symptomatic of the epistemological crisis of the old "bourgeois subject," and the emergence from that crisis of a new, disintegrative postmodern subjectivity and a new sense of the world as restlessly plural. This, of course, is something like Fredric Jameson's story of postmodern-ism as the cultural logic of late capitalism (see Jameson 1991b).[11] I do not see that this higher-level, motivating metanarrative is incompatible with the story I have chosen to tell; but I have preferred to remain at a lower level of narrative motivation, in hopes that any loss in scope and explana-

tory power will have been compensated for by a closer, finer-grained engagement with the mechanisms of postmodernist texts themselves.

I have by no means abandoned the story of *Postmodernist Fiction* here, and in fact it is retold below not once but several times, in various ways, notably in Chapter 1. However, I have also tried to leave room throughout for alternatives to my own story, in particular for the stories I happen to find (after my own, of course) most persuasive, namely Dick Higgins's (1978 and 1984) and Alan Wilde's (1981). Introduced in Chapter 1, Wilde's story about the "worldliness" or "this-worldliness" of postmodernist fiction returns (somewhat to my own surprise, I confess) at the conclusion of Chapter 7. Other stories featured alongside my own, and serving to complicate the picture, include the one about postmodernism as "double-coding," told in various ways and with differing inflections by Barth, Eco, Hutcheon, and Jencks (Chapters 1 and 6); the one about the effacement of the hierarchical distinction between "high" and "low" culture in the postmodernist period, a story identified especially with Huyssen and Jameson (Chapter 10); and even a story, told by Jameson and by Harvey (1989), according to which modernism and postmodernism are not period styles at all, one of them current and the other outdated, but more like alternative stylistic options between which contemporary writers are free to choose without that choice necessarily identifying them as either "avant-garde" or "arrière-garde" (Chapters 8 and 9).

"Postmodernist" in the title of my first essay, "Telling postmodernist stories," is deliberately ambiguous: on the one hand, these are stories *about* postmodernism; on the other hand, as stories that in some sense do the work of theories, they themselves also *belong to* postmodernism. This essay explicitly addresses the constructed ("as if") character of post-modernism. It endorses Christopher Norris's account of the "narrative turn" of postmodernist thought, and proposes a narrative construction of postmodernism, a story about the "postmodernist breakthrough." Several versions of this story have already been told, and no doubt there are other versions that could be told, so it is important to distinguish among better and less good stories – "better" not in the sense of objectively *truer* (a criterion discredited by the constructivist approach), but in terms of such criteria as rightness of fit, validity of inference, internal consistency, appro-priateness of scope, and above all *productivity*. Two versions of the break-through narrative are scrutinized, one John Barth's familiar story about exhaustion and replenishment, the other Dick Higgins's much less familiar one about cognitivism and postcognitivism, and Higgins's is found to satisfy the criteria for a good story better than Barth's. The entire expo-sition is framed by a close reading of a short fiction/essay by Max Apple, "Post-Modernism," reprinted in an appendix to the chapter.

In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Joyce's *Ulysses* was treated as an exemplary modernist text. Chapter 2, "Constructing (post)modernism: the case of

Ulysses," reopens and problematizes this issue of the modernism of *Ulysses*. In fact, *Ulysses* is (or ought to be) a literary-historical scandal. Split roughly down the middle, its first half has long served as a norm for "High Modernist" poetics, while only recently have we begun to regard its second half as normatively postmodernist. How can the same text both inaugurate "High Modernism" and belong to postmodernism? The awkward case of *Ulysses* makes it clear that any accounts we choose to give of the relations between modernism and postmodernism are only constructs, that there can be no strictly objective criteria for preferring one construct over its competitors, and that, on the contrary, choices among competing constructs can only be made strategically, in the light of the kind of work that the chosen construct might be expected to accomplish.

Pynchon, for me as for many other students of postmodernist literature, is like the episode of the looking-glass house from *Through the Looking-Glass*: try as one might to turn one's back on him and walk away, one always ends up walking right in through his front door again anyway. This is just what has happened, I find, in the essays in this book that are *not* specifically devoted to Pynchon's texts: there he is, time and again, especially *Gravity's Rainbow*, whatever the announced topic might be. The only solution, it seems, is the one Alice finally hit upon, namely, to approach Pynchon head-on (or as nearly head-on as the special difficulties of his texts permit), and then one has some chance of finally reaching the hilltop, from where it is possible to survey the entire countryside. This is the strategy of the three essays, two on *Gravity's Rainbow*, one on *Vineland*, that make up the second part of this book.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on "the uses of uncertainty" in *Gravity's Rainbow*. The first of these essays, "Modernist Reading, Postmodernist Text: The Case of *Gravity's Rainbow*," incorporates a tentative first draft of the opposition between the epistemological and ontological dominants later developed more fully in *Postmodernist Fiction*. The second Pynchon essay, " 'You used to know what these words mean': misreading *Gravity's Rainbow*," focuses on the indeterminacies of the second-person pronoun which effectively undermine overly-confident readings of Pynchon's text. Chapter 5, "Zapping, the art of switching channels," is devoted to *Vineland* (1990), Pynchon's first novel in seventeen years, to date the only successor to *Gravity's Rainbow*. More accurately, this essay uses *Vineland* as the pretext for reflecting on the place of television in postmodernist fiction, in particular its double role as metaphor or model of postmodern culture and as *mise-en-abyme* of the postmodernist text itself.

The first four essays (on postmodernist metanarratives, *Ulysses*, and *Gravity's Rainbow*) are rather intensively preoccupied with the discourse of critical interpretation, and what it tells us about periodization (among other things). To put it differently, these chapters are in part concerned

with *institutions of reading*, including the institution of literary criticism. Thereafter this preoccupation subsides somewhat, though it never entirely disappears from the later chapters. In Part 3, the focus shifts to a different level of story-telling: from the story of the historical succession of periods (the preoccupation especially of Part 1) to the story (which may or may not be coordinated with the periodization narrative) of the succession of phases in an author's career or *oeuvre*.[12]

Closest in approach to the essay on *Ulysses* (Chapter 2) is the one on Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (Chapter 6); they are in effect sibling essays, a fact which Eco, himself a Joycean (among many other things), would, I trust, appreciate. This essay examines *The Name of the Rose* in the light both of the literary-historical problematics developed in Part 1, and of Eco's own well-known reflections on modernism and postmodernism. *The Name of Rose* is found to be an "amphibious" text, queasily poised between modernism and postmodernism. Ultimately, the very question "Modernist or postmodernist?" is shown to be misguided, and *The Name of the Rose* comes to be seen not as a puzzle to be solved but rather as a challenge to the entire enterprise of distinguishing period styles, perhaps, indeed, to the entire enterprise of literary historiography.

At the close of Chapter 6, I suggest that whether we found Eco's career and *oeuvre* narratively intelligible or not, and if so in what way, would depend on what he would do next after *The Name of the Rose*. Since that essay was written, of course, Eco has published his second novel, *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988), and so I have devoted a separate chapter to *Foucault's Pendulum* and its implications for the story of Eco's career as a postmodernist.

Chapter 8, "Women and men and angels," turns to the less familiar novels of Joseph McElroy: *A Smuggler's Bible* (1966), *Hind's Kidnap* (1969), *Lookout Cartridge* (1974), *Plus* (1979), and above all his massive (1200-page), synoptic *magnum opus*, *Women and Men* (1987).[13] *Women and Men* is characterized here (in a Shklovskyan gesture of provocation) as the most typical novel of contemporary literature. This is so, if in no other respect, then at least in the sense that it seems to recapitulate three successive periods in the poetics of fiction, realism, modernism, and (perhaps) postmodernism. This recapitulation is not "horizontal" – realist, modernist and postmodernist segments joined end-to-end, somewhat in the manner of *Ulysses* – but "vertical," in superimposed strata, like a literary-historical layer-cake. In the end, doubt is cast on the postmodernism of the "postmodernist" stratum of *Women and Men*; reasons are given for thinking of *Women and Men* as late-modernist rather than "fully" or "properly" postmodernist.[14]

Like Pynchon, Christine Brooke-Rose had already figured conspicuously, but dispersedly, in *Postmodernist Fiction*. Chapter 9, " 'I draw the line as a rule between one solar system and another': the postmodernism(s)

of Christine Brooke-Rose," gives me the opportunity to assemble the dispersed fragments of my treatment of Brooke-Rose into a sustained reading of her fiction from *Out* (1964) through *Verbivore* (1990). The case of Brooke-Rose also gives me the opportunity to correct the misleadingly "progressivist" tenor of my account of literary history in *Postmodernist Fiction*. For, unlike the exemplary authors whose career trajectories I traced at the beginning and end of that book (Beckett, Robbe-Grillet, Fuentes, Coover, Nabokov, Pynchon, and Joyce), Brooke-Rose's career does not follow a smooth course from modernism through a transitional late-modernist phase to postmodernism. Rather, her novels of the sixties and seventies *alternate* between modernist and postmodernist poetics, in a way that is not adequately accounted for in terms of "regression" to a less "advanced" aesthetic. The case of Brooke-Rose's fiction compels us to see modernism and postmodernism as two equally "innovative" or "advanced" alternatives which our historical situation makes available to contemporary writers.[15]

The transition from the "advanced" and "difficult" writers I discuss in Part 3 (the Eco of *Foucault's Pendulum*, McElroy, Brooke-Rose) to the science-fiction writers of Part 4 might at first glance appear abrupt and weakly motivated, as though the SF material had been casually tacked onto a book otherwise very different in orientation. In fact, however, there are many connections linking Part 4 to the rest of the book, most of all to the essay on Brooke-Rose, who several times in her career (in *Out* and *Such*, later on in *Xorandor* and *Verbivore*) has turned to science fiction for motifs, materials, images and language. More generally, I find science fiction to be one of the places where elite (or "art") fiction "interfaces" most actively with popular (or "entertainment") fiction in the postmodern period.

I devoted a chapter to science fiction in *Postmodernist Fiction*, and since then my conviction has grown that SF, far from being marginal to contemporary "advanced" or "state-of-the-art" writing, may actually be *paradigmatic* of it. This is so in at least two respects. First, SF is openly and avowedly ontological in its orientation, i.e., like "mainstream" post-modernist writing it is self-consciously "world-building" fiction, laying bare the process of fictional world-making itself. Secondly, SF constitutes a particularly clear and demonstrable example of an intertextual field, one in which models, materials, images, "ideas," etc. circulate openly from text to text, and are conspicuously cited, analyzed, combined, revised, and reconfigured. In this it differs from "mainstream" postmodernism only in the openness and visibility of the process. It is precisely this relative openness of intertextual circulation in SF that makes it so valuable as a heuristic model of literature in general, and postmodernist literature in particular.

Everything that makes SF a paradigm of contemporary writing at large

is present, if anything even more conspicuously, in the fiction of the latest SF generation, so-called "cyberpunk" SF. In fact, if cyberpunk did not exist, postmodernist critics like myself would have had to invent it.

Perhaps we did, in a sense. Certainly, cyberpunk science fiction seems to be on the postmodernist critical agenda. If it had not been there before, it has surely made it onto that agenda now with the appearance of Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991b). Here Jameson speaks of cyberpunk as "henceforth, for many of us, the supreme *literary* expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself" (Jameson 1991b:417; emphasis is Jameson's own). If I understand the tenor of this somewhat enigmatic note and the other scattered allusions to cyberpunk (1991b:28, 286, 321), Jameson seems to be identifying cyberpunk as *the* privileged literary manifestation of postmodernism. Indeed, he seems even to be implying that cyberpunk is somehow the *direct* expression of late capitalism itself, almost as though it were unmediated by inherited literary forms or historical genres. If this is what he means to imply (but perhaps I have misunderstood him here), then he is mistaken, for, far from being the "direct" expression of anything, cyberpunk is a complex "layering" of mediating forms and genres, a confluence of literary-historical streams of diverse provenance. In order to "place" cyberpunk properly in its cultural-historical context it would be necessary to take into account, at a minimum, two distinct writing practices, on the one hand, the poetics of traditional science fiction, on the other the poetics of postmodernist fiction. This is what I have tried to do in Chapters 10 and 11.

My own interest in the relations between cyberpunk SF and postmodernism might be said to date from the moment I noticed what seemed to be a duplication of scenes between two novels, one a postmodernist "surfictional" novel by Raymond Federman (*The Twofold Vibration*, 1982), the other a cyberpunk SF novel, one of the earliest, by Rudy Rucker (*Software*, also 1982). In each, an aging ex-freak arrives at a spaceport of the near future, full of trepidation at the prospect of traveling to an off-world colony where some dubious form of immortality (perhaps indistinguishable from death) has been promised him. "Why doesn't Cyberpunk Fiction admit that it comes out of Surfiction," Federman complains, "or at least the kind of Surfiction that played around (playgiaristically) with S.F.?" (Federman in McCaffery 1988a:38). Obviously *Software* couldn't have "come out of" *The Twofold Vibration*, at least not directly, since their publication dates are the same. Furthermore, each of these two novels draws independently on its own "tradition" and develops out of its own intertextual field: Federman, out of the exitless spaces of Beckett's fiction (e.g. "The Lost Ones") and his own autobiographical myth, repeated in novel after novel, of having survived his own death in the Holocaust; Rucker, out of what he calls the "beat old clichés" of the SF

genre – "the robots and the brain eaters and the starships" – transformed, under the pressure of cyberpunk's generic self-reflexiveness, into something if not absolutely new, then at least qualitatively different from anything that has come before in the genre (Rucker in McCaffery 1988b:56–7). Nevertheless, Federman does have a point: these two novels do seem to share some common intertextual field, and there does seem to have been some kind of convergence or interaction between cyberpunk and postmodernist fiction. Moreover, Federman is also right when he observes that cyberpunk draws specifically on the kind of postmodernist writing "that played around (playgiaristically) with S.F.," that is, postmodernism that has itself already drawn on the stock of SF motifs and materials. In other words, the traffic between cyberpunk and postmodernism is two-way; and it is to this two-way traffic that the essays on cyberpunk in Chapters 10 and 11 are devoted.

ESSAYING

If I have chosen to refer to the chapters that follow as "essays," this is not because they are particularly "essayistic" in the *belles-lettres* sense, but in order to emphasize their provisional and exploratory nature. They are to be regarded as test borings or samplings, forays into new terrains for purposes of reconnaissance and mapping. Moreover, they are "occasional" essays, in the sense that most, at least in their early versions, were tailored to fit specific occasions, for which they had originally been commissioned. Some began as conference papers ("Modernist Reading" and the essays on Joyce, *The Name of the Rose*, and cyberpunk); other as book reviews (the essays on *Vineland* and Joseph McElroy); one, the essay on Brooke-Rose, was originally commissioned for a book project that sadly failed to materialize. I have sought to preserve the "occasional" quality of these essays as appropriate to the book's theme of provisionality.

The present book differs most markedly from *Postmodernist Fiction* in undertaking full-dress readings of specific works and *oeuvres*. Some reviewers complained of the earlier book that it nowhere demonstrated the adequacy of its model of postmodernism through a sustained reading of a single text. Now such a complaint rests, it seems to me, on a dubious assumption about what poetics is for, namely, that its purpose is to generate new interpretations of texts. Nevertheless, one way to answer such complaints is obviously to undertake readings, such as the ones to be found here, which demonstrate, among other things, the dialectical relationship between "readings" and "poetics." The categories of poetics, including historical poetics – such as, say, the period category "postmodernism" – cannot be "applied" to texts, as tools to raw materials; rather, in the process of reading, the texts' resistances inevitably modify the categories brought to bear on them, re-tooling the tools.

The texts and authors I have chosen to discuss here do not necessarily represent my judgment of the "best" (whatever that could mean) of the postmodernists, or those with the greatest potential staying-power ("able to withstand the test of time"); nor are they even necessarily my personal favorites. Rather, they seem to me in some sense (a sense I have tried to clarify at the beginning of my essay on Joseph McElroy in Chapter 8) the *most typical* texts of postmodernism, or the most *typically postmodernist*; the ones through which, as through a selection of differently-shaped lenses, we get the sharpest, clearest "fix" on postmodernist poetics. Further, each of the texts I discuss seems to generate a kind of magnetic or, better, gravitational field around itself, attracting other texts into orbit around it, some nearer, some farther out. Part of what interests me in these texts is precisely this capacity they have to create their own intertextual fields, and I have sought, typically in the middle sections of these essays, to map selected regions of their fields.

Rereading these essays, I have been struck by the oddly discontinuous and suspensive organization that many of them share. That is, the main line of argument tends to break off at a certain point, and to remain suspended, not resuming again until certain more or less lengthy "blocks" of supporting argumentation or evidence have been maneuvered into place. I call them "blocks" advisedly, for this mode of organizing material might well be an artifact of electronic word-processing, which makes it possible, for instance, to shift blocks of text around freely, to open windows onto other documents, to merge files, etc. In other words, the characteristic organization of these essays might itself be a further example of the "interface" between writing and computer word-processing technology that I discuss below (in Chapter 9 and again in Chapter 10) in the case of postmodernist "interface fiction" (e.g. Hoban's *The Medusa Frequency*, Vollmann's *You Bright and Risen Angels*, Brooke-Rose's "computer tetralogy").

Or, if my metaphors of "blocks" and "suspension" do not quite capture what I imagine to be the oddity of these essays' organization, then perhaps I could speak of them as "spiral" in form. Beginning with a specific, nodal text, they tend to spiral outward, collecting ever-widening sweeps of "incidental" material until, just before the end, they collapse back again into the text from which they set out initially. Among the incidental topics (perhaps not so incidental after all) that have been "swept up" into the essays in this way are television and TV-viewing (Chapter 5), nuclear apocalypse (Chapter 6), paranoia and conspiracy (Chapter 7), angels and angelology (Chapter 8), and everywhere, obsessively I fear, death.

Some of these topics – television, nuclear war, paranoia – have the status of postmodernist topoi, in the sense that they first enter the literary repertoire in the postmodernist period; in this respect, *Constructing Postmodernism* attempts a kind of census, however preliminary and partial, of

the specifically postmodernist topic repertoire. Other topics, far from being specific to the postmodernist repertoire, belong to the perennial repertoire of literary topoi, and in this case I have sought to demonstrate why and how postmodernist poetics has appropriated these traditional topoi to its own repertoire. Preeminent among these perennial topics is, of course, death. How postmodernists appropriate death, and to what end, is especially evident in the coupling of death with television, a traditional topos with a specifically postmodernist one, in texts such as Pynchon's *Vineland* (1990), described below in Chapter 5. Postmodernist modelings of death, I conclude, serve us, in lieu of traditional religious models, as imaginative rehearsals for our own personal extinctions, dry runs for what we can each really do once and once only. Thus, my conclusion echoes the poet Joseph Brodsky's in his jacket blurb for Danilo Kiš's death-obsessed *Encyclopedia of the Dead* (Kiš 1989): "Having read this book," Brodsky writes, "one stands a chance of deriving from one's own extinction the comfort of knowing that one has already been here with this Kilroy" – or, if Kilroy seems a bit dated, then let's say with these postmodernist graffiti artists, spray-painting their logos all over death's walls.

Part I

Narrating literary histories

Chapter 1

Telling postmodernist stories

THE FIRST STORY: "POST-MODERNISM"

In quest of a theory of postmodernism, we might turn to a short text by Max Apple with the likely-sounding title of "Post-Modernism" (from *Free Agents*, 1984; see Appendix 1.1). We would be disappointed, for instead of a theory – or at least a manifesto or polemic from which an implicit theory might be inferred – we get a story. Not *much* of a story, granted, and one that starts out rather like an essay ("It's always safe to mention Aristotle in literate company") before settling down into the narrative mode: "having no theory to tell, I will show you a little post-modernism" (Apple 1984:135). This is only the first of a series of disorienting reversals in the relative roles of theory (or "analysis," Apple's other term for it, 137) and story in the course of this text. Indeed, this opening reversal already contains another reversal in it: Apple will not "tell" a theory but will "show" a little postmodernism; but surely one "tells" a story, not a theory, and in any case the sample of postmodernism he "shows" us takes the form of a little story.

Incredulity toward metanarratives

In this disorienting reversibility of story and analysis, as well as its manifest dissatisfaction with theorizing, Apple's text justifies its title after all. For Apple's "Post-Modernism" shares these features with the "postmodernism" of J.-F. Lyotard's influential account (1979; English trans. 1984b). Lyotard, of course, has defined postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (1984b:xxiv). Scientific (analytical, theoretical) knowledge, he argues, arose in opposition to "traditional" narrative knowledge. Yet because scientific knowledge is incapable of legitimating itself, of lifting itself up by its own epistemological bootstraps, it has always had to resort for legitimation to certain "grand narratives" *about* knowledge – the Enlightenment narrative of human liberation through knowledge, the Hegelian narrative of the dialectical self-realization of Spirit, the Marxist

narrative of revolution and the founding of a classless society, and so on. In our time, according to Lyotard, faith in these and other grand or metanarratives has ebbed, so that knowledge has had to seek its legitimation *locally* rather than universally, in terms of limited language-games and institutions, through what Lyotard calls "little narratives" (1984b:60). Unlike scientific knowledge, "little" or first-order narratives are self-legitimating. They construct their own pragmatics: they assign the participant roles in the circulation of knowledge (addressor, addressee, narrative protagonist), and found the social bond among these participants. They "define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do" (1984b:23).[1]

   Lyotard is not alone in discrediting metanarratives and endorsing self-legitimating "little narratives." For example, we also find Richard Rorty distinguishing in analogous terms between the two ways in which "reflective human beings" give sense to their lives. One is "to describe themselves in immediate relation to a nonhuman reality," i.e., to aspire to objectivity, or scientific knowledge in Lyotard's sense; while the other involves "telling the story of their contribution to a community," i.e. solidarity, or Lyotard's narrative knowledge (Rorty 1985:3).[2] Similarly, Hayden White has recently undertaken the "redemption of narrative" in historiography (White 1987). White vindicates narrative history on the grounds that it serves to test our culture's "systems of meaning production" – systems which, to the embarrassment of "scientific" historians, narrative history shares with myth and literature – against real-world events:

> The historical narrative does not, as narrative, dispel false beliefs about the past, human life, the nature of the community, and so on; what it does is test the capacity of a culture's fictions to endow real events with the kinds of meaning that literature displays to consciousness through its fashioning of patterns of "imaginary" events.
>
> (White 1987:45)

In other words, where Lyotard sees narrative as self-legitimating because of its deep complicity with our culture's social construction of reality, White sees it, for precisely the same reason, as critical and self-critical. Finally, Jerome Bruner has recently sought to confer legitimacy on narrative as a "mode of thought" on a par, epistemologically and ontologically, with the empirico-logical mode of science (Bruner 1986). It is with these and similar developments in mind that Christopher Norris (1985), surveying the intellectual landscape, has claimed to discern a general "narrative turn" of postmodern thought analogous to, but also in some ways undoing, the "linguistic turn" of modern thought earlier in this century. "As the idea gains ground that *all* theory is a species of sublimated narrative, so doubts emerge about the very possibility of *knowledge* as distinct from

the various forms of narrative gratification" (Norris 1985:23). This is where Max Apple comes in. Sharing the postmodernist incredulity toward analysis and its legitimating metanarratives which also characterizes Lyotard, Rorty, White, Bruner and others, Apple conspicuously opts for the gratifications of "little narratives" *about* postmodernism in lieu of theories of it.

This is not yet the whole story of Apple's "Post-Modernism," however. There is, after all, "a bit of analysis" (1984:137) in Apple's text, some theorizing amid the storytelling. Despite his suspicion of theorizing, Apple actually does undertake to define the " 'post-modern' attitude" which his little story, he says, demonstrates: "Maybe you would characterize this attitude as a mixture of world weariness and cleverness, an attempt to make you think that I'm half kidding, though you're not quite sure about what" (1984:137). In other words, Apple defines the "postmodern attitude" in terms of what Alan Wilde (1981) has called "suspensive irony." Where the characteristic "disjunctive irony" of modernism sought to master the world's messy contingency from a position above and outside it, postmodernist suspensive irony takes for granted "the ironist's immanence in the world he describes" (Wilde 1981:166) and, far from aspiring to master disorder, simply accepts it. When the writer in Apple's little exemplary story, pondering the likelihood of error in an ad for a $6.97 pocket calculator (battery included), observes that the situation leaves "plenty of room for paranoia and ambiguity, always among the top ten in literary circles" (1984:136), he is naming characteristically *modernist* forms of closure; paranoia and ambiguity are forms of disjunctive irony. But in *making* this remark about paranoia and ambiguity ranking among the literary top ten, the attitude which Apple's narrator displays is characteristically *postmodernist* and suspensive – the attitude of someone who is half kidding, though we are not quite sure about what.

Apple's postmodernist suspensiveness is also evident in the flood of inconsequential detail which all but overwhelms his little story: Target Stores and Woolco and K-Mart and Sears and Penney's and Ward's; a calculator originally priced $49.95, then $9.97, now $6.97; Col. Qaddafi and weight-lifting accidents and Vietnamese wet-nurses and the *National Enquirer*; and so on and so on. Wilde writes, about another postmodernist writer,

> Like the pop artists, [he] puts aside the central modernist preoccupation with epistemology, and it may be the absence of questions about how we know that has operated most strongly to "defamiliarize" his (and their) work. [His] concerns are, rather, ontological in their acceptance of a world that is, willy-nilly, a given of experience.
>
> (Wilde 1981:173)

Or, as Max Apple succinctly puts it in the final sentence of "Post-

Modernism": "Everything is the way it is" (1984:139). Wilde is actually talking about Donald Barthelme in the passage I have quoted, but he might as well be talking about Max Apple, and in fact does talk about Apple in strikingly similar terms elsewhere in the same book (Wilde 1981:132–3, 161–7).

The postmodern breakthrough

But if, as appears to be the case, Wilde and Apple are theorizing and/or telling stories about the same postmodernism, then after all there *is* a metanarrative lurking behind Apple's little story. For Wilde's theory of postmodernism is explicitly inscribed within a metanarrative of change and innovation, the story which Gerald Graff has called "the myth of the postmodern breakthrough" (1979). Once upon a time, so Wilde's story runs, there was modernism, a period style characterized by disjunctive irony and reflecting a crisis of consciousness, the modernists' painful sense of the irreducible gap between their need for order and the disorderliness of reality. Then came "a space of transition" (Wilde 1981:120) – rather less abrupt in Wilde's account than in other versions of the breakthrough myth – which Wilde calls late-modernism, and which he associates with the writing of Christopher Isherwood and Ivy Compton-Burnett. Beyond this threshold lies a strange new world of suspensive irony, in which the pathos of the modernist hunger for order has been attenuated, "turned down" to a less anxious acceptance of the world as "manageably chaotic" (1981:44), and where the new literary emotions are low-key, understated ones. What especially characterizes Donald Barthelme's postmodernist writing, Wilde tells us, is

> the articulation not of the larger, more dramatic emotions to which modernist fiction is keyed but of an extraordinary range of minor, banal dissatisfactions ... Barthelme's stories express not anomie or accidie or dread but a muted series of irritations, frustrations, and bafflements.
>
> (Wilde 1981:170)

This is precisely the emotional tone of Apple's "Post-Modernism":

> In her own life Joyce Carol is undeluded by romantic conventions. Her stories may be formulaic but she knows that the shortness of life, the quirks of fate, the vagaries of love are always the subjects of literature.
> Sometimes her word processor seems less useful than a 19-cent pen. Sometimes she feels like drowning herself in a mud puddle.
> Still she is neither depressed nor morose.
>
> (Apple 1984:138–9)

Wilde's (and presumably Apple's) version of this story differs from other versions of the breakthrough myth in the strangely muted, minor-key character of its brave new world, neither heroically utopian nor tragically dystopian,[3] and, as I have already noted, in the relative gradualness of the transition. Nevertheless, it has much in common with the other versions of this metanarrative, all of which in turn have something in common, as Dominick LaCapra has observed, with the "traditional apocalyptic paradigm." In LaCapra's retelling of it, that metanarrative runs something like this:

> an all but inscrutable (magical, hermetic, religious, archaic, pre-Socratic, savage, medieval, pre-Renaissance – in any event, totally "other") discourse of the past was disrupted at some time by the rise of a scientific, secular, analytic, reductive, referential, logicist ... discourse that dominates modernity; all we have at present are faint glimmerings of another global turning point in the history of discourse that will give content and meaning to what must be for us a blankly utopian future.
>
> (LaCapra 1985:104)

Versions of this metanarrative have been told, for instance, by T.S. Eliot, where it takes the form of a story about the dissociation of sensibility and its imminent re-association; by Michel Foucault, where it occurs as the story of the emergence and disappearance of the category "Man"; and more recently by Timothy Reiss (1982) and Francis Barker (1984), who in their different ways tell a similar story of the emergence in the seventeenth century of the entire complex of bourgeois subjectivity, textuality, representation, and the Cartesian "mind." Barker's version of the story differs from the others in its *literal* apocalypticism: threatened with annihilation, bourgeois discourse will, Barker fears, contrive to bring the whole world down with it in a real, not discursive, nuclear apocalypse.[4]

So pervasive is this apocalyptic metanarrative of the postmodernist breakthrough that few who address the issue of postmodernism have wholly escaped its influence, including those who are skeptical of it or indifferent to it.[5] Gerald Graff, who gave currency to the phrase "myth of the postmodern breakthrough," is of course one of the skeptics; by calling it a "myth" he implies that it is a delusion, so much mystification. But by attacking the breakthrough story he testifies to its existence *as a myth* in our culture – in other words, as a legitimating metanarrative.

Both David Lodge (1977, 1981) and Christine Brooke-Rose (1981) have proposed accounts of postmodernist writing radically at odds with the breakthrough narrative, construing postmodernism as essentially *parasitic* on earlier modes; nevertheless, the breakthrough scenario seems to insinuate itself into their discourses anyway, as if against their wills. For Lodge, postmodernism is essentially rule-breaking art, and thus ultimately dependent on the persistence of the rules that it sets out to break, as a figure

depends upon the ground against which it defines itself. But postmodernist writing breaks the rules of metaphoric and metonymic writing alike, and thus stands outside and apart from the pendulum-like alternation of metaphoric and metonymic modes which, according to Lodge, constitutes the history of twentieth-century writing. Lodge's discourse thus conforms to the postmodernist breakthrough narrative without apparently meaning to.

Similarly, Brooke-Rose seems unable to accommodate postmodernism to her narrative about the varieties of fantastic and quasi-fantastic fiction in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Pursuing her story as far as the *nouveau roman* and contemporary science fiction and fantasy, she abandons it abruptly when she comes to (American) postmodernism. Postmodernist fiction, it would appear, does not continue the historical sequence of fictional modes, but rather is parasitic on earlier modes, and so requires a new model for its description, one based not on the principle of hesitation (the underlying principle of fantastic fiction and kindred modes) but on principles of parody and stylization. Ironically, by substituting one model for another in this way and changing her story just at the denouement, Brooke-Rose testifies, if only inadvertently, to postmodernism's radical discontinuity with earlier modes – the breakthrough narrative once again (see McHale 1982.)

In the key of "as if"

Do not suppose, however, that by associating Wilde's and (by implication) Apple's postmodernist stories with this pervasive breakthrough metanarrative I am seeking in some sense to unmask or denounce or deconstruct their discourses. Far from it. I would insist that there is nothing wrong with the so-called myth of the postmodernist breakthrough, including Wilde's and Apple's versions – it makes quite a satisfying story, in fact – but just so long as we divest it of its *authority as* metanarrative. To escape the general postmodernist incredulity toward metanarratives it is only necessary that we regard our *own* metanarrative incredulously, in a certain sense, proffering it tentatively or provisionally, as no more (but no less) than a strategically useful and satisfying fiction, in the key of "as if" (see Vaihinger 1965 (1935)). I am recommending, in other words, that we need not abandon metanarratives – which may, after all, do useful work for us – so long as we "turn them down" from metanarratives to "little narratives," lowering the stakes, much as the postmodernists themselves (in Wilde's and Apple's account of them) turn down modernism and lower its stakes.

This "turning down" or attenuation of metanarrative is undertaken very much in the spirit of Barthelme's program for undoing patriarchy:

Your true task, as a son, is to reproduce every one of the enormities

[committed by your father], but in attenuated form. You must become your father, but a paler, weaker version of him. The enormities go with the job, but close study will allow you to perform the job less well than it has previously been done, thus moving toward a golden age of decency, quiet, and calmed fevers. Your contribution will not be a small one, but "small" is one of the concepts you should shoot for . . . Begin by whispering, in front of a mirror, for thirty minutes a day. Then tie your hands behind your back for thirty minutes a day, or get someone else to do this for you. Then, choose one of your most deeply held beliefs, such as the belief that your honors and awards have something to do with you, and abjure it. Friends will help you abjure it, and can be telephoned if you begin to backslide. You see the pattern, put it into practice. *Fatherhood can be, if not conquered, at least "turned down" in this generation* – by the combined efforts of all of us together. Rejoice.

(Barthelme 1982b (1975): 270–1)

I take it that a similar program of deliberate attenuation of the "strong" claims of metaphysical foundationalism characterizes recent developments in Italian philosophy, so-called *pensiero debole*, "weak thought" (see Rosso 1987; Borradori 1987/8).

Instead of taking metanarratives at their own valuation, I am advocating "trivializing" them, in a certain sense, so that instead of a Hegelian meta-narrative we have a "little" or minor Hegelianism, instead of a Marxist metanarrative we have a minor Marxism – and instead of postmodernist apocalypticism we have a minor apocalypticism.[6]

We are justified in telling or entertaining the metanarrative of the post-modernist breakthrough just so long as we do so not in the mode of objectivity (to revert to Rorty's opposition) but in the mode of solidarity; in other words, so long as we do not claim that our story is "true," a faithful representation of things as we find them "out there" in the world (but what "things" correspond to a literary-historical construct such as "postmodernism" anyway? and where, in such a case, is "out there"?), but only that our story is *interesting to our audience* and *strategically useful*. "Period terms," writes Matei Calinescu,

> function best when they are used heuristically, as strategic constructs or means by which we inventively articulate the continuum of history for purposes of focused analysis and understanding. Strategic is the key word here . . . It suggests goal-directed action, permanent readiness to weigh possible scenarios against each other, and ingenuity in the selec-tion of those scenarios that are at the same time most promising and unpredictable. (The right degree of unexpectedness is a major strategic value.)

(Calinescu 1987b:7)